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AUTHOR Kehayan, V. Alexander
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ABSTRACT

Peer Intervention Network (PIN) began in New Jersey in 1980, as a group process intervention for improving the school performance of 7th and 8th grade students with motivational and attitudinal problems which interfered with their learning. Traditionally, these students tend to develop a "delinquent" profile and frequently became classified for special education programs in high school. Through the PIN program, low achieving students are referred and evaluated for the peer counseling and support program. Once accepted, teacher and parental approval and cooperation are obtained. Group participation is mandatory. Sessions meet once or twice a week, with emergency times set aside in the morning and evening for additional meetings. Internal resources (peer "experts" in various academic subjects, peer "shadows," and peer "consultants") and external resources (teachers, counselors, and parents) are identified for each member. Meetings, based on gestalt therapy principles of "here and now" focus on progress reports, identification of roadblocks, and scheduling times for "shadow" meetings. Results of the 3-year study found that group development progressed from resistance to polarity to unity. Grade point averages improved from 1.0 to 2.0 and 80 percent of the PIN members were promoted. Further, PIN students were more active in peer support programs and human relations projects in their high school years. (BL)

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PEER INTERVENTION NETWORK: A PROGRAM FOR UNDERACHIEVERS

V. Alexander Kehayan, Ed.D.
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Peer Intervention Network (PIN) is a high impact, easily manageable program targeted for Grades 7 and 8 at the middle school level. It is a group process intervention designed to meet the needs of students who are not classifiable under special education categories, but have motivational and attitudinal problems which interfere with their learning. These are the students who tend to abdicate responsibilities, become frustrated and "turned off" from school, and begin to develop a profile similar to delinquents or drug abusers. Their behavior usually deteriorates at the high school level where they are frequently referred for special education services and finally become classifiable due to the extended duration of their academic and emotional deterioration.

PIN is a preventive program which attempts to stem the tide of academic failure in these youngsters and prevent their special education placement and isolation from the mainstream.

How the PIN Program began:

The concept was originated in 1980 at the Fort Lee Middle School, Fort Lee, New Jersey. The impetus of the approach was inspired by several factors. The year of 1980 saw an over-abundance of referrals to the evaluation team in our school. By March it became apparent that most of these referrals did not lead to classifiable intervention whereby students were placed into special education classes. These students were not taking advantage of the ancillary services (i.e., group counseling, guidance counseling, compensatory education, after-school special help from individual teachers, and other supportive programs).

Their evaluation profiles turned up negative in the sense that they had no severe learning or emotional deficits. The accumulation of non-classified referrals underscored the need to serve these youngsters who were "falling between the cracks." At that point it was this author's realization that some type of primary intervention approach was necessary. The target population emerged as a group of fifteen youngsters who fell into this category of mild amotivational syndrome with delinquent behavior. The test results on the Mooney Problem Checklist (Mooney, 1950) showed that most of these fifteen students indicated conflicts in the areas of Home and Family, Self-Concept, and Interpersonal Relationships. All of their IQs were either average or above-average.

It became obvious that these youngsters required a strategy to bring them together and foster a desire to accept more responsibility for their own learning and personal growth. A successful experience might reverse their negative self-concepts. PIN was formulated out of three aspects of the author's personal theoretical orientation. The first element, Gestalt Psychology, emphasizes the here and now, assumption of personal responsibilties, and awareness of road blocks and barriers to personal growth. Such an orientation was well suited to a population of youngsters who refused to do their homework, spent too much time "hanging out," and engaged in excessive substance abuse such as marijuana smoking. Many of them exhibited escapist types of behavior. The notion of a peer group network was intended as a vehicle to precipitate awareness of a crisis in their lives and highlight the need to make some improvements. Networking based on some of the principles in Marilyn Ferguson's

book, Aquarian Conspiracy (Ferguson, 1980), also have been incorporated into this author's personal philosophy of education. Finally, the third element amalgamated into this project was that of peer influence and its incredible power to harness progresive growth and change (Candler and Goodman, 1979).

Synthesizing the above three principles, the author decided to assemble a group in March of 1980, a time which coincided with the end of the third marking period. This gave the group a full marking period (eight weeks) to produce some positive changes. The group met two to five times per week until the end of the school year. The project has continued over the past three years, with different numbers of students each year, depending on existing needs and numbers of pupils who fit their criteria.

Program Preparation:

Having identified a disaffected population, the author screened a population of fifteen students to incorporate into a peer intervention. The author's first step was to seek approval for such a program through the middle school principal, assistant principal, teachers and parents. Since these students were already failing, and many of them were on the way to retention, the necessity of the program of intervention became obvious. This author approached the principal with facts and profiles and requested that he allow their schedules to be changed to include two periods for Peer Intervention Network, during the last period of the school day, a non-academically oriented schedule slot. The principal's concern for these students' potential retention was a major selling point for the initiation of the program. After receiving the principal's endorsement, the author then approached the assistant principal who also approved the notion of making the PIN group a requirement of these students' schedules with full disciplinary consequences if they did not attend the group sessions. He offered his support and endorsement of the program.

The group was finally narrowed to eight members whose schedules seemed to coincide in terms of time availability two times a week. Other factors involving the selection of these eight included gender, personality profiles, and a balance of some more highly motivated and less motivated students.

The author then approached the teachers of these eight students and asked them if they would permit them to be released for this group intervention because of the potential risks for retention or multiple academic failures. The author made sure to encourage their input into the development process. Several teachers raised questions about the time element, inquiring as to the feasability of making significant changes between March and June. The teachers were very cooperative in allowing these students to be released from one non-academic class per week. As a result, the second group period was changed to a lunch period, during which students were provided the opportunity to eat their lunch in the group. This was a compromise based on a realistic pedigogical consideration identified by the teachers.

The teachers helped to develop a form of feedback so that the author could obtain feedback on progress as the group continued. They suggested a "homework sheet" which included a profile of each student's daily homework completion, attitude in class, and assignments due for the following day. Teachers agreed to sign this sheet at the end of each day. Students would then be required to

place the homework sheet in the author's mailbox. The sheet turned out to be a valuable instrument to ascertain at what level of involvement and conduct each student was functioning.

During these teacher meetings some questions were raised about the impact of only two sessions per week on the student's improvement. It was decided that more time would be needed, and as a result of the brainstorming session with teachers, a contingency for additional sessions was added to the program format. Thus, mornings (before school) and afternoons just after the last class (during a 30 minute homeroom wrap-up) were reserved for additional group meetings if the needs arose throughout the program. The principal and the assistant principal agreed to allow the author to use these periods if necessary for emergency meetings.

The author was now ready to approach the students' parents to secure approval and written permission for their children to participate. During phone calls to the eight parents, the author explained the intent of the group, and very firmly stipulated the importance of each parent to withstand their children's pressure to drop out of the group. The author explained the necessity of this radical intervention in order to reverse their failure patterns before these students were faced with summer school or retention. He explained his qualifications to the parents, and assured them that this was not a psychotherapy group, but merely a support network which was to be required and imposed upon these youngsters who were abdicating responsibility.

One of the strategies used by this author to enlist the parents' aid was to side with their resistance and form a partnership with them in order to help their youngsters "turn it around." Parents were also informed that after school or early morning meetings might be needed in the event that some group members needed more support. It was agreed that parents would do everything they could to clear their students' after-school schedules and encourage them to attend these emergency meetings if the need arose.

Finally, after gaining their approval on the phone, written agreements were sent to the parents who then signed them and returned them. The participation agreements included a clause which explained the total effort of this program and the need to maintain good attendance throughout the rest of the school year. These parents were well aware that they would receive resistance and several arguments from their youngsters who were being forced to face problems they had ignored for several months. Parents were encouraged to contact the author if problems arose. This preparation period was approximately two weeks. The first group met at the end of March.

Program Description:

Internal Resources:

PIN has three internal resources, two of which begin at the onset and one which emerges later on in the program process.

The first resource is called the "Expert." Each student's areas of expertise are identified at the beginning of the group. For example: if one youngster is competent in spelling, he or she then becomes a resource for other members to use. Thus, each member is requested to write down their areas of

expertise on a sheet of paper with their names and phone numbers. The assumption is that each member has a given set of competencies at the beginning of the process. Identification of competence becomes a positive validation procedure. A pool of experts is created and distributed to the membership. Others are required to call upon students when they are in need of extra help in a given subject area. If there are not enough areas of expertise covered within the membership, the group must find other students in the school who can fill the gaps. For example, they may have to go out of the group to find an expert in history who would agree to consult to the group and offer assistance. In essence, all subject areas are covered.

The second resource of the group is called the "shadow." This resource takes the form of a "big brother" or "big sister" who is an executive member. Each person must choose a shadow from the membership. The shadow's role is to work with his or her partner to develop a plan of action and to improve the partner's academic progress. The shadow helps the partner to identify a given subject area to focus upon during the onset of the program. Then a plan of action is developed with the help of the shadow and implemented with constant monitoring through phone contacts, meetings, and extra help sessions. The shadow must be aware of the partner's problems and encourage the partner to use the available resources in or out of the group to receive the necessary assistance in order to improve. The shadow must keep abreast of all long term and short term assignments, tests, and class work responsibilities of his or her partner. In essence, this shadow becomes an alter ego, or even a super ego who serves in the role of executive or conscience. The shadow reports at each meeting on his or her partner's progress or lack of progress and is held accountable for the partner's performance.

If one person is not pleased with his or her shadow's way of intervening, he may exchange the shadow with someone else, provided another member is willing to make an even swap. This procedure enables group members to develop a sense of control over their own collaborative bonds. Nevertheless, it is important that a cohesive rationale be presented to the group leader before allowing any member to exchange shadows. No coercion must be involved in the exchange.

It should be noted that the shadow-partner relationship may not be reciprocal. That is, if B is A's shadow, then A may not be B's shadow, but A must find his/her own shadow. This non-reciprocal relationship avoids the potential for mutual collusion to threaten the integrity of the relationships.

The third resource is called the "consultant". This role emerges later in the group's life, after one member improves grades to satisfy criteria to a point where he or she no longer requires a shadow. Then that person may "fire" his or her shadow and exist autonomously in the group without need for supervision. Nevertheless, there is a major change in this role. Instead of being a partner to a shadow this new role carries higher status as an additional resource to the group. The consultant is the person who has gone through the throes of the process and has much to teach others about success and positive change. This emergent role as helping agent provides a considerable amount of prestige and serves as a reward to be sought after by other members.

External Resources:

The first type of external resource is the teacher who may offer assistance in a given subject area where help is needed by a member of the group. Group members are often required to seek help from a given teacher if they are not improving in their work with the help of the group. The shadows are also required to check on their progress in meetings with these teachers by speaking to them or conferring with them weekly. The guidance counselor is a very valuable externally based professional who may enter the group and give reports on each member's progress. These external resources offer support for these students to continue in this necessary intervention.

Feedback Mechanism:

The homework sheet, as mentioned earlier, is a simple device to provide data on homework assignments completed, behavior in class, and long term projects due. Students supply these documents to the group leader. They are completed and signed by the teachers. Often the parents will sign these sheets to indicate their knowledge of the student's level of work.

In addition to the homework sheet feedback, the group leader usually makes contact with the teachers or groups of teachers to ascertain other kinds of information or progress not found on the homework sheets. These means are valuable vehicles to extend open communication and regulate the quality and duration as well as the necessary frequency of meetings during the intervention.

Parents are often notified in the event that students miss more than one or two group meetings. For example, if the student gives an excuse that he or she has a dentist appointment more than three times in a row, it is a typical protective measure for the group leader to phone the parents to ascertain the accuracy of this excuse. The leader also receives valuable feedback from the guidance staff who frequently meet with the students during the PIN intervention. They are often able to provide information which is not divulged in the group meetings. Conferences are held regularly with the professionals and confidentiality is respected.

Stages of the Group Development:

The first meeting of the group is a low-keyed session where group members are just told to report on a given day. The fact that this is an approved part of the schedule is also reiterated. A PIN "fact sheet" is distributed (refer to page 8). Basically, this document explains the rules and rationales of PIN. The group leader goes over these rules, regulations and expectations of the group and fields questions about the content.

In the first five weeks of the group's development, the leader serves in a rather low-keyed executive role, absorbing anger and outrage as a result of this new expectation thrust upon group members. The third group meeting is typically spent choosing shadows and identifying skills and resources. The fourth meeting is devoted to development of a needs assessment and a plan of action. Typically, the shadow spends time with his or her partner engaging in some reflective thinking and identification of major conflicts which have impeded progress. These conflicts are listed and then a plan of action is developed to respond to at least one road block to better progress. For example, if a youngster lists "not studying" as a barrier to homework complet-

ion, the shadow and partner may develop a plan of action designed to extend a study time and quality of work.

A Typical PIN Session:

First the shadows review their partners' progress, the leader goes over the homework sheets, and then the partners must identify where they have received help, which resources they have used in the group, and any changes in the plan. Then the group goes on to specific problems such as class-cutting, teacher-student conflicts, or other dilemmas which may affect progress. Good news is applauded by the group. For example, an A on a test is seen as a very positive event and is rewarded through tremendous support and encouragement.

Frequently group members are missing important class notes. In these situations exemplary class notes from responsible group members are photocopied and distributed to those students who need them. Members also spend time reviewing a test to analyze the items, categorize errors and suggest techniques to improve performance. Experts are consulted to brief members on ways to prepare for up-coming exams.

If severe problems exist, particularly with one or two members, the group is put on "Red Alert" and extra meetings are held the following morning or the following afternoon after school. Parents are notified when after-school meetings take place so that they may make arrangements for alternative transportation for students to return to their homes. At these meetings, members in need are supported by the entire group, who must find ways to supplement the shadows' efforts.

Resistance:

During the first month of the group, angry outbursts occur as members put up barriers, attempt to sabotage the group, and project their own problems on to the group leader. Scapegoating teachers is common practice. Cries of injustice and demands surrounding their coercion to join this group are also typical responses. Nevertheless, calm and rational answers should prevail from the group leader.

Polarity:

After four or five weeks, the polarity stage begins to emerge. A split between achievers and non-achievers usually becomes evident with non-compliers. The successful members often become the counterpart to the more rebellious or dilinquent members. Division in the group occurs. Some members begin to discharge their shadows because they have become more successful, and this intensifies the polarity of the group.

Unity:

After about ten weeks, the stage of unity occurs because there is more of an alliance between positive members and fewer renegades remain. A bond forms where new roles begin to emerge. These roles are typically: the idol, who gains the respect of the group by emulating the leader; the devil's advocate, who plays the renegade part; the deviant, who sets the standard for other members to avoid; the prodder, who questions and generates action against the renegades; and the seducer, who attempts to cajole and seduce the unruly members into more obedient types of behavior.

Results:

Over the past three years the results have been quite encouraging. Typically, an eight member group, with each member having two D's and one F, finds its members emerging with two D's and one C. The average grade point mean average goes from 1.0 to a 2.0 average. Thus, we see an F to C average emerging in most of these groups. There are always "casualties" in the group. These are the students who do not respond to such an intervention. Nevertheless, the average promotion rate is of 80%.

Follow-up contacts at high school indicate that these group members are more active in peer support programs currently existing in the high school milieu. Therefore, they have apparently adapted a helping ethic. They often serve as consultants and trainers to human relations projects and engage in school and community outreach services.

Summary:

This group is not for everyone. It is a very anxiety-provoking experience, requiring time and energy from its leadership. It is a risk in that it often precipitates extremely resistant behavior. Nevertheless, over the long haul it appears to be worth the effort. Major transformations occur most often when the group leader is able to offer a consistent, positive role model. The author recommends the approach and will gladly answer any questions regarding its implementation.

PIN* FACT SHEET
*PIN stands for Peer Intervention Network

1. Who is in this group?

   This group is made up of kids who are bright, normal, not disturbed and capable of succeeding in school. For various reasons its members have chosen not to pass their subjects. Before this group ends, you will all know why and you will improve.

2. The Group's Purpose and Task:

   To assist each other in improving your school work.

3. The Way We Operate:

   (1) Meet once or twice a week.

   (2) Hear and react to progress reports.

   (3) Explain what is blocking you and what you will do to unblock.

   (4) Set up times of shadow contacts and teacher contacts.

4. You are required to attend all sessions.

5. You must serve as a shadow to another group member. In your role as shadow, keep a record of all assignments and do anything legal and ethical to help your partner improve his or her work. Your own partner cannot be your shadow too. You must have a different shadow, not the one you supervise.

6. If at the end of the marking period, you raise <u>all</u> your grades, you no longer need supervision and can drop your shadow. But as an expert, you remain in the group as someone's shadow.

7. If your shadow is not helping you, he/she must suffer the consequences, and can be fired, provided he/she can find another member who will accept his supervision (an even exchange).

8. You are in this together till school ends.

9. Each week you must report on how your plan is going and supply evidence of progress (grades or tests, assignments, etc.) If things are not going well, the group must meet until a new plan has been developed.

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